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# Interfaith Diplomacy as a Path Towards Israel-Indonesia Relations?

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Nazhath Faheema and Syera Anggreini Buntara

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## Israel-Asia Relations: New Trends, Old Challenges?

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Much of the scholarship on Israel's foreign policy focuses on its relations with countries in the West or with its Arab neighbours; the significant rapprochement between Israel and countries in Asia has been largely neglected. There have been many indicators in the past decade pointing to these burgeoning ties – from China's involvement in Israel's infrastructure (in particular, Haifa port), the rise of Israel-India economic and security cooperation, and the expanding trade between Israel and Indonesia to the recent establishment of a new quadrilateral forum, the "I2U2", comprising India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

Against the backdrop of these burgeoning relationships, the Middle East Institute at NUS convened a two-day workshop in February 2023 gathering together scholars from across the world – including Israel, China, the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, France and Singapore – to explore the depth of Israel's partnerships across Asia. The seminar delved into the political and economic drivers of these relationships as well as their scope (and limitations). Particularly, it discussed the evolution of Israel's policy towards China, India and Japan. It also looked into lesser known areas, such as Israel-Azerbaijan relations and the development of Holocaust studies in China. Altogether, the seminar shed light on a research topic – Israel's Asia policy – that is likely to expand in the coming years. This is one of the papers based on the seminar.

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# Interfaith Diplomacy as a Path Towards Israel-Indonesia Relations?

Nazhath Faheema and Syera Anggreini Buntara\*

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*Indonesia's policy towards Israel has been dominated by its support for the Palestinian cause and has a strong anti-Israel character. This is due to pressure from the country's Muslim community. Before attempting to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, the world's largest Muslim country must therefore first try to ease hostile sentiments towards Israel. Interfaith diplomacy – an approach that was highlighted in the Abraham Accords signed by Israel and several countries in the Middle East since September 2020 – may chart a path for Indonesia to establish diplomatic ties with Israel, provided such normalisation does not compromise Indonesia's solidarity with Palestine.*

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The prominence of interfaith dialogue is a peculiar feature of the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco in 2020, followed by Sudan in 2021.<sup>1</sup> The name of the accords, taking after Abraham, a revered figure in the religious tradition of Judaism,

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<sup>1</sup> US State Department, “The Abraham Accords – Declaration”, 13 January 2021, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

Christianity and Islam, profiles the centrality of inter-religious dialogue (IRD) in what has been widely considered a historic diplomatic breakthrough in the Middle East.

While political, security and economic considerations were far more important forces driving the Arab countries to establish relations with Israel, the interfaith diplomacy apparently at play is intriguing. Looking at how IRD<sup>2</sup> may have helped to shift the foreign policies of the Arab states that had longstanding hostile relations with Israel can provide some insights into how Muslim-majority countries in Asia, notably, Indonesia, can move forward in their relations with Israel.

Few studies have explored the role of interfaith diplomacy in global politics.<sup>3</sup> In a recent paper, Paul Hedges suggested that IRD can serve as part of track 1.5 diplomacy to build social cohesion and peace across countries.<sup>4</sup> Based on this observation and other views, this paper explores whether IRD can play a part in shifting Indonesia's diplomatic relationship with Israel.

## The Muslim World and Interfaith Diplomacy

The idea of a Jewish state has always been a thorny issue for the Muslim world, extending from the Middle East to other parts of the world. This was due in part to the narratives that portray the Jewish people as enemies of Islam, based on unbalanced interpretations of the incidents

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Cornille, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), xii. Inter-Religious Dialogue (IRD) is defined as “any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions”. In this paper, the terms interfaith and interreligious dialogue are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> John Fahy and Jeffrey Haynes, “Introduction: Interfaith on the World Stage”, *The Review of Faith: International Affairs* 16, no. 3 (2018): pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2018.1509278>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hedges, “Is Interreligious Dialogue in International Relations ‘Dialogue-Washing’ for Authoritarian Regimes? An Exploration of KAICIID and ICCS as Track 1.5 Diplomacy”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2023): 67–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2023.2200276>

that happened in Medina from 623 to 632 CE.<sup>5</sup> Some hostile encounters that the Prophet Muhammad had with the Jewish tribes during that period and the Qur'anic verses relating to those incidents<sup>6</sup> have been generalised and accentuated. Mixed with the Nazi anti-Semitic discourse and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, hatred between Jewish and Muslim communities deepened in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is driven by various factors such as history, nationalism, occupation of land, security and geopolitics, framing it as a war between the Jewish state and the Muslim *umma* has been the most effective propaganda in contemporary international politics. This faith-based narrative has affected the policies of Islamic states and Muslim-majority countries towards Israel.

“While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is driven by factors such as history, nationalism, occupation of land, security and geopolitics, framing it as a war between the Jewish state and the Muslim *umma* has been the most effective propaganda in contemporary international politics.”

Egypt and Jordan have had full diplomatic relations with Israel since the Camp David Accords of 1979 and the Israel–Jordan Treaty of Peace of 1994, respectively. Thereafter, positive relations between Israel and Muslim countries seemed impossible. Despite some covert relations with Israel, Muslim countries have long been driven in their outward policy on Israel by the religious sentiments of their populations. Their

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<sup>5</sup> In the constitution of Medina formulated by Prophet Muhammad, Jewish tribes were given a special place. Article 30 particularly sets out religious tolerance between Jews and Muslims. There are also other narratives that show the positive state of relations between these two religious communities.

<sup>6</sup> One example is Quran, 2: 100–2.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 161.

support for the Palestinian cause was primarily couched in terms of backing their co-religionists in fighting for Jerusalem, one of the holy lands for Muslims. Within the Middle East, the motivations for establishing relations with Israel were the security threat posed by Iran and the potential economic benefits that could accrue from Israel's strong economic and technological base. However, normalising relations would risk being seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Therefore, a more cosmic reason was necessary to advance relations with Israel. Particularly, a rationale that would speak to the religious side of the matter.

**“Normalising relations would risk being seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Therefore, a more cosmic reason was necessary to advance relations with Israel.”**

The easing of anti-Israel views within the Muslim community required a narrative that counters the idea of the Jewish state and its people being enemies of Islam. Labelling the normalisation agreement the “Abraham Accords” and its consistent emphasis on the Abrahamic religions – referring to the shared origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and symbolising the unification of the three religions<sup>8</sup> – was a

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<sup>8</sup> Aaron W Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 141–144. The term “Abrahamic religions” is popularly used within the field of interfaith practice and academia, especially since the years following the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962–1965) and the September 11 attacks in the United States. However, it has been criticised as “meaningless” by academics such as Hughes, who argues that this is an untheorised term disguised as a historical reality. See also Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, “Prophet Abraham: A Figure of Exclusivism or Ecumenism?”, S. Rajaratnam School of International Relations, Occasional Papers in Interreligious Relations, No. 28, 1 March 2022), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/srp/interreligious-relations-irr-issue-28-prophet-abraham-a-figure-of-exclusivism-or-ecumenism-by-mohammed-gamal-abdelnour>. Abdelnour argues about the “usefulness of the category and its ability to enrich the commonalities of the three traditions without blurring the boundaries.”

tactful way of changing the perspective of Jews from enemies of Islam to people who shared kinship ties with Muslims by virtue of being descendants of Abraham, or Prophet Ibrahim in Islamic belief.<sup>9</sup> The treaty signed between Israel and the UAE spells out that “the Arab and Jewish peoples are *descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham* ... committed to a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> The accords emphasise IRD in the second paragraph of the declaration, preceding all other important factors essential for peace and stability in the region, suggesting that interfaith diplomacy is to be used to bridge the divide between Israel and the Arab countries.

“Labelling the normalisation agreement the “Abraham Accords” ... was a tactful way of changing the perspective of Jews from enemies of Islam to people who shared kinship ties with Muslims by virtue of being descendants of Abraham.”

The chances of the new narrative about Jewish people having effect, or at the very least not facing resistance, would require an environment that is receptive to IRD. In the case of the UAE, a series of steps had been taken for some years to build the state’s international image as “a stronghold of religious freedom, pluralism, and multiculturalism”.<sup>11</sup> For example, the government declared the year 2019

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<sup>9</sup> Abraham, who is known as Prophet Ibrahim in Islam, is believed to be one of the ancestors of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>10</sup> US State Department, “The Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations, and Full Normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel”, 15 September 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UAE-Israel-treaty-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ofir Winter and Yoel Guzansky, “Islam in the Service of Peace: Religious Aspects of the Abraham Accord”, INSS Insight, 6 September 2020,

as the “Year of Tolerance”. In February that year, in an unprecedented event, the UAE hosted Pope Francis, who signed the “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” document with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayyeb, witnessed by the UAE’s monarch.<sup>12</sup> The visit was followed by the building of a multi-faith complex in Abu Dhabi, the Abraham Family House, housing a mosque, church and synagogue.

The Abraham Accords seem to fit in nicely with these gestures. They are projected as part of a “reconciliatory spirit” and “marketed as a renewed religious rapprochement between Muslims, Jews and Christians”.<sup>13</sup> While the UAE’s high-profile interfaith activities may not have directly influenced the decision to label the normalisation agreement the Abraham Accords, they have clearly been relevant.<sup>14</sup> Will a similar strategy work for Indonesia’s policy towards Israel?

## Indonesia’s Position on Israel

Despite the Indonesian government’s restrictions on engaging in commerce with Israel, bilateral trade between Indonesia and Israel was reported to total about US\$100 million in 2018.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, there have been mentions of covert relations between the two countries over the years.<sup>16</sup> Yet the pressure of the conservative Muslim population

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<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-uae-deal-and-islam/>. (Winter & Guzansky, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> BBC, “Pope Francis arrives on historic visit to UAE,” 3 February 2019,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47106204>

<sup>13</sup> Winter & Guzansky, “Islam in the Service of Peace”.

<sup>14</sup> Hae Won Jeong, “The Abraham Accords and Religious Tolerance: Three Tales of Faith-Based Foreign-Policy Agenda Setting”, *Middle East Policy* 28, no. 1: 36–50, (2021)

<https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12540>.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Singh and Ehud Yaari, “How Does Indonesia View the Prospect of Normalization with Israel?”, *PolicyWatch* 3397, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 October 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-does-indonesia-view-prospect-normalization-israel>.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Barton and Colin Rubenstein, “Indonesia and Israel: A Relationship in Waiting”, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 17, no. 1/2 (2005): pp. 157–170, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/25834625>.



continues to be a hurdle for any shift in Indonesia's official policy on Israel. Outwardly, the world's largest Muslim country leans towards the pan-Islamic sentiment against the Jewish state, which is mixed with pro-Arab solidarity and post-colonial animus.<sup>17</sup> For Indonesia, this sentiment also comes with what Hadler refers to as "Malay" anti-Semitism.<sup>18</sup>

The most influential factor driving Indonesia's policy towards Israel is the potential backlash from the country's pious Muslims, for whom the future of Palestine is a concern. In fact, Palestine has been part of the discourse in Indonesia since as early as the 1920s, appearing as a regular topic of discussion among members of Muhammadiyah, the second largest mass-based Islamic organisation in the country, by virtue of their "feelings of affinity for Arabs and of Islamic solidarity".<sup>19</sup> In 1952, the Indonesian government expressed through the news agency Antara that it had no intention of recognising Israel as most of its population was Muslim.<sup>20</sup>

**“Palestine has been part of the discourse in Indonesia since as early as the 1920s.”**

Over the years, there have been ample instances reflecting Indonesia's anti-Israel position. The most significant recent instance was when public objections to Israel's planned participation in the FIFA U-20 World Cup tournament that Indonesia was due to host from May to June 2023 led to the country losing its hosting rights. Indonesia's top Muslim clerical body, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), called on the

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<sup>17</sup> Moshe Yegar, "The Republic of Indonesia and Israel", *Israel Affairs*, 12, no. 1 (2006), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Hadler, "Translations of Antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and Violence in Colonial and Post-Colonial Indonesia", *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 94: 291–313, (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810500031012>.

<sup>19</sup> Barton & Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel", 159.

<sup>20</sup> Barton & Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel", 160–161.

government to explain the decision to allow the participation of the Israeli national football team.<sup>21</sup> In addition, more than 100 conservative Muslim demonstrators held a protest march in Jakarta in March 2023, orchestrated by a conservative alliance. Chanting “Allahu Akbar”, the demonstrators waved flags bearing the Islamic declaration of faith along with Palestinian flags. They also carried banners that called for Israel’s removal from the tournament and declared that Israel was the enemy of Islam.<sup>22</sup> In response to the uproar, Indonesia’s president, Joko Widodo, stressed that Israel’s participation in the tournament “has no relation to Indonesia’s consistent foreign policy stance on Palestine”.<sup>23</sup>

A survey ... conducted just after Israel lost the right to host the FIFA games ... [seemed to suggest that] the majority of Indonesians do not mix sports with politics.

Some key observations from this issue are useful to assess whether Indonesia’s policy on Israel can possibly shift. First, the government would have been aware that the Israeli team would be participating in the games and it is implausible that the government did not anticipate some sort of backlash from conservative Muslims. This would not have been the first instance of Israeli participation in a sports event in the country; at least three Israelis have participated in sports

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<sup>21</sup> Jakarta Post, “Muslim Groups Protest Israel’s Participation in FIFA U-20 Cup”, *The Jakarta Post*, 20 March 2023, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2023/03/20/muslim-groups-protest-israels-participation-in-fifa-u-20-cup.html>

<sup>22</sup> Andi Jatmiko, “Dozens in Indonesia Protest Israel’s Presence at U-20 Cup”, Yahoo! News, 20 March 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/dozens-indonesia-protest-israels-presence-095149026.html?ref=sp>

<sup>23</sup> Cabinet, Secretariat, Indonesia, “President Jokowi: Israel’s Participation in FIFA U-20 World Cup Has No Relation to Indonesia’s Political Stance on Palestine”, Cabinet Secretariat Indonesia, 28 March 2023, <https://setkab.go.id/en/president-jokowi-israels-participation-in-fifa-u-20-world-cup-has-no-relation-to-indonesias-political-stance-on-palestine/>,

events in Indonesia over the past several years.<sup>24</sup> Also, an Israeli parliamentary delegation attended an Inter-Parliamentary Union event in Bali in March 2022.<sup>25</sup>

“Strong objections [to Israel’s participation in the FIFA games] came mainly from two groups: one of Indonesia’s major political parties, PDI Perjuangan, and conservative Muslim groups.”

Second, a survey by Indonesia Political Indicator (IPI) conducted just after Israel lost the right to host the FIFA games found that over 60% of the respondents had no problem with an Israeli team playing on Indonesian soil.<sup>26</sup> This could be an indication that the majority of Indonesians do not mix sports with politics. Strong objections came mainly from two groups: one of Indonesia’s major political parties, PDI Perjuangan (PDIP), and conservative Muslim groups. The political party had expressed objection to Israel’s participation since August 2022.<sup>27</sup> Several prominent PDIP political figures explicitly objected to the Israeli team’s participation. A notable one among them was Ganjar Pranowo, who is one of the most electable candidates for the 2024 presidential

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<sup>24</sup> CNN Indonesia, “3 Atlet Israel Yang Tampil Di Indonesia Dalam 10 Tahun Terakhir”, CNN Indonesia, 27 March 2023,

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/olahraga/20230327142408-178-929870/3-atlet-israel-yang-tampil-di-indonesia-dalam-10-tahun-terakhir>.

<sup>25</sup> Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “PDI-P’s Own Goal? Controversy over Indonesia’s Loss as U-20 FIFA World Cup Host”, Fulcrum, 6 April 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/pdi-ps-own-goal-controversy-over-indonesias-loss-as-u-20-fifa-world-cup-host/>.

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Valentina Christa, “Most Indonesians Open-Minded about Israeli Football Team’s Arrival: Survey”, *Jakarta Globe*, 20 April 2023, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/most-indonesians-openminded-about-israeli-football-teams-arrival-survey%20>.

<sup>27</sup> CNN Indonesia, “PDIP: Penolakan ke Israel Suara Kemanusiaan, Bukan Politis”, 30 March 2023, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20230330123942-32-931272/pdip-penolakan-ke-israel-suara-kemanusiaan-bukan-politis>

election. Ganjar, currently governor of Central Java, first expressed his objection on 23 March 2023.<sup>28</sup>

“The silence [in previous instances of Israeli visits to Indonesia] makes it highly likely that the PDIP’s stand on Israel’s participation in the FIFA games was driven more by political considerations in view of the upcoming presidential election.”

PDIP claimed its objection was based on the party’s ideology and humanity, which lends towards the Palestine crisis. However, no such position was known to have been taken in earlier visits by Israelis to the country. The silence in those cases makes it highly likely that the PDIP’s stand on Israel’s participation in the FIFA games was driven more by political considerations in view of the upcoming presidential election. However, according to a public opinion poll, Ganjar’s electability, which had already been decreasing, dropped further, apparently because the public tied his vehement objection to Israel’s participation in the games to the cancellation of Indonesia’s hosting rights.<sup>29</sup> Ganjar’s stance has been criticised on social media, especially by football fans, who evidently were unhappy about the mixing of politics and sports. A national phone survey conducted in March 2023 with 1,213 respondents found that a majority of Indonesians would have wanted the games to be held in their country even if Israelis participated.<sup>30</sup> For them,

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<sup>28</sup> Detik.com, “Kronologi Ganjar Tolak Israel hingga Kini Kecewa Pildun U-20 Gagal di RI”, 30 March 2023, <https://www.detik.com/jateng/sepakbola/d-6646435/kronologi-ganjar-tolak-israel-hingga-kini-kecewa-pildun-u-20-batal-di-ri>

<sup>29</sup> Kompas, “Survei Litbang Kompas: Elektabilitas Ganjar Turun Imbas Tolak Timnas Israel di Piala Dunia U20”, 24 May 2023, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/05/24/05575291/survei-litbang-kompas-elektabilitas-ganjar-turun-imbasi-tolak-timnas-israel>

<sup>30</sup> Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “PDI-P’s Own Goal?”

hosting the game was evidently “a badge of pride for Indonesia”,<sup>31</sup> transcending the hatred against Israel.

## Prospects for Interfaith Diplomacy

The FIFA incident shows that politicking with an anti-Israel stance may not always garner public support. At the same time, it also hints at the need for Indonesia to focus on introducing IRD as a possible means of shifting perspectives on Jews, and eventually Israel.

Israel and Jews have been portrayed negatively in Indonesian public discourse, with a plethora of books and media echoing the same tone. Research in 2014 by the Anti-Defamation League, a US-based Jewish NGO, found in 2014 that 48% of the adult population of Indonesia harboured anti-Semitic attitudes.<sup>32</sup> More recently, a theology professor from the United States found through interviews with 500 high school and 700 university students across Indonesia in 2018 and 2019 that Jews were the third most hated people after LGBTI people and communists.<sup>33</sup> Hatred of Israel even led to objections when the local Jewish community in Minahasa district, North Sulawesi, established a Holocaust museum in January 2022. This was essentially a photo exhibition and its opening was attended by the governor of the province. MUI and the Islamic Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) protested the opening. The deputy chairman of MUI’s Advisory Board was said to have claimed the

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<sup>31</sup> Resty Woro Yunar, “Indonesia’s Jokowi ‘Sad’, Football Fans Angry as Fifa Pulls U20 World Cup over Israel’s Participation”, *South China Morning Post*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3215447/indonesias-jokowi-sad-football-fans-angry-fifa-pulls-u20-world-cup-over-israels-participation>; Chag De Guzman, “The Messy Politics and High Costs of Indonesia’s Anti-Israel FIFA Fiasco”, *Time*, 6 April 2023, <https://time.com/6269303/indonesia-fifa-u20-world-cup-impacts/>

<sup>32</sup> ADL, “Indonesia”, *The ADL GLOBAL 100: An Index of Antisemitism, 2014 – Indonesia*, <https://global100.adl.org/country/indonesia/2014>.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Barrett and Karuni Rompies, “Keeping the Faith, Quietly: Inside Muslim Indonesia’s Hidden Jewish Community”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/keeping-the-faith-quietly-inside-muslim-indonesia-s-hidden-jewish-community-20220203-p59tnv.html>.

museum could provoke outrage in local society and even to have called for it to be “razed to the ground”.<sup>34</sup>

Much of the anti-Semitism in Indonesia may be due to lack of encounters with Jews. The small Jewish communities scattered in Jakarta, Manado, Jayapura and elsewhere are estimated to number only 200.<sup>35</sup> The country has only one legally recognised synagogue, located in Tondano, North Sulawesi.

### “Much of the anti-Semitism in Indonesia may be due to lack of encounters with Jews.”

The solution to the lack of encounters with local Jews could be to create closer affinity between Indonesia’s Muslim population and the worldwide Jewish community. The 1000 Abrahamic Circles Project started by Dr Dino Patti Djalal, a former Indonesian ambassador to the United States, is one entity that has already undertaken initiatives of this nature. The genesis of the project was an “Abrahamic peace mission” in 2012 to get Muslim and Christian religious leaders from Indonesia to travel to the United States to engage with representatives from the three Abrahamic religions. That encounter was said to have led to an influential conservative Islamic cleric from West Java meeting a rabbi and eventually dropping anti-Semitic content from his sermons.<sup>36</sup> The group continues to organise events where Indonesian Muslim and Christian religious leaders are able to engage with foreign Jewish leaders. Such encounters, which are effectively a form of track 1.5 diplomacy, could serve in the long run to lessen the hostility towards Jews among

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<sup>34</sup> US State Department, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Indonesia”, 15 May 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/indonesia/>.

<sup>35</sup> US State Department, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Indonesia”.

<sup>36</sup> Website of 1000 Abrahamic Circles Project, “Our Story”, 2023, <https://www.1000circles.com/ourstory>

Indonesian Muslims even if they do not necessarily lead to normalisation with Israel.

“In facilitating dialogue between Indonesian Muslim leaders and Jewish leaders overseas, Singapore provides an opportunity nearer home, given its small Jewish community, which has 200 years of history.”

In facilitating dialogue between Indonesian Muslim leaders and Jewish leaders overseas, Singapore provides an opportunity nearer home, given its small Jewish community, which has 200 years of history.<sup>37</sup> The Iraqi ancestry of Singapore’s Jews could be a cultural bridge that appeals to the Arabic traditions of the Muslim community in Indonesia. Jewish leaders in Singapore have been among Singapore’s interfaith leadership, sharing friendships with Muslim leaders through their participation in Singapore’s Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO).<sup>38</sup> The chief rabbi of Singapore was one of the speakers at the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace in 2019.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, during an international conference organised by Singapore in 2022,<sup>40</sup> Indonesian delegates, along with others, visited a synagogue in Singapore and met with Jewish

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<sup>37</sup> Singapore Jews website, “History”, reproduced from Mattia Tomba, eds., *Beating the Odds: 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties*, Middle East Institute, November 2019, <https://singaporejews.com/history-2/>, 2023

<sup>38</sup> The Singapore Jewish community was one of the founding members of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore. Rabbi Jacob Shababo was elected president of the then Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru in September 1950. Vina Jie-Min Prasad and Jaime Koh, “Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore”, *Singapore Infopedia*, 9 December 2014, [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2014-12-09\\_125938.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-12-09_125938.html)

<sup>39</sup> Faisal Assegaf, “Pemimpin rabbi Singapura kunjungi kelas bahasa Ibrani di Jakarta”, *Albalad.co*, 10 July 2019, <https://albalad.co/kabar/2019A9065/pemimpin-rabbi-singapura-kunjungi-kelas-bahasa-ibrani-di-jakarta/>

<sup>40</sup> The International Conference of Cohesive Societies (ICCS), “Community Explorations”, <https://www.iccs.sg/community-experience/communityexplorations/>

leaders. Such interfaith interactions in Indonesia's immediate neighbourhood could serve as a positive example of Jewish-Muslim relations. It is an alternative narrative to the hostility towards Jewish people prevalent in Indonesia.

“The Islamic mass organisation Nahdlatul Ulama, which has long had a more tolerant view of Israel, is an important player in developing and sustaining the country's interfaith diplomacy.”

The Islamic mass organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has long had a more tolerant view of Israel, is an important player in developing and sustaining the country's interfaith diplomacy. The late Abdurrahman Wahid, NU's leader at one time who later became the country's president, visited Israel several times in the 1990s. In 2018, NU's secretary general, Yahya Staquf, visited Israel and met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The visit was criticised in Indonesia and prompted some protests.<sup>41</sup> Yahya held that his visit was aimed at promoting the Palestinian cause. He was reported as having called for compassion between Jews and Muslims, which, according to him, could lead the way for Israel to establish relations with Muslim countries around the world.<sup>42</sup> Yahya has been keen to profile NU internationally as a proponent of moderate Islam by promoting the concept of Islam Nusantara, and its derivative, “humanitarian Islam”. As NU leader, he was also instrumental in organising an interfaith summit in Bali in November 2022, just before Indonesia hosted the G20 summit.<sup>43</sup> On the

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<sup>41</sup> AP, “Netanyahu Unexpectedly Meets with Indonesian Muslim Leader”, *The Times of Israel*, 15 June 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-unexpectedly-meets-with-indonesian-muslim-leader/>.

<sup>42</sup> AP, “Netanyahu Unexpectedly Meets with Indonesian Muslim Leader”.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Raymond Arifianto, “Towards ‘Humanitarian Islam’: New Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman and the Global Initiative to Promote Religious Moderation”, IDSS Paper no. 3



U-20 World Cup issue, Yahya supported the idea of the Israeli team participating in Indonesia, saying he believed Israel's participation would not harm Palestinians.<sup>44</sup> Such advocacy by NU, Indonesia's largest Islamic mass organisation, augurs well for Israel-Indonesia relations.

### “Indonesian Jews in fact represent an untapped area of interfaith diplomacy.”

It is noteworthy that Yahya's visit to Israel was at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), which has been engaged in interfaith diplomacy in Indonesia for the past few years. In July 2022, AJC officials undertook an “unprecedented visit”<sup>45</sup> to Indonesia and met with government officials and delegates. Their mission was to “promote interfaith cooperation and advance deeper understanding of Judaism and the Jewish people” as well as “explor[e] prospects for warming relations between Indonesia and the State of Israel”.<sup>46</sup> The mission included a Shabbat dinner for religious leaders, scholars and interfaith activists from Indonesia. Earlier, in May 2020, the group hosted a Facebook live session with Jusuf Kalla, former vice president of Indonesia, to discuss the challenges and opportunities for Indonesia to establish diplomatic

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(26 January 2022), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip22003-towards-humanitarian-islam-new-nahdlatul-ulama-chairman-and-the-global-initiative-to-promote-religious-moderation/>.

<sup>44</sup> Niruban Balachandran, “Why Indonesia Should Open Diplomatic Relations with Israel”, *The Jakarta Post*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/04/04/why-indonesia-should-open-diplomatic-relations-with-israel.html>.

<sup>45</sup> American Jewish Committee (AJC), “American Jewish Committee Advances Interreligious Understanding in Unprecedented Visit to Indonesia,” 28 July 2022, <https://www.ajc.org/news/american-jewish-committee-advances-interreligious-understanding-in-unprecedented-visit-to>

<sup>46</sup> AJC, “American Jewish Committee Advances Interreligious Understanding in Unprecedented Visit to Indonesia”.

ties with Israel.<sup>47</sup> Most recently, in May 2023, a member of AJC was involved in various IRD dialogues in Indonesia, including a public lecture at the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) that covered the similarities between Islam and Judaism.<sup>48</sup>

“The exclusion of Judaism as an officially recognised religion in Indonesia and the need for Jews to identify themselves in their official identification documents as adherents of any of the recognised religions also is a deterrent [against their participation in meaningful interfaith dialogue].”

AJC also engages with Indonesians who identify as Jewish people.<sup>49</sup> Indonesian Jews in fact represent an untapped area of interfaith diplomacy. They could better bridge the gap between Israelis and Indonesians than foreign groups like AJC. Members of the local Jewish community will be more relatable at the grassroots level because they speak the local language and have some cultural affinity with Muslim Indonesians. The aforementioned synagogue in Tondano has been the site of some IRD among Muslims, Jews and Christians in that area.

However, it is not just the anti-Semitism prevalent in the country that has made it hard for local Jewish communities to engage in

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<sup>47</sup> AJC, “A Conversation with H.E. Jusuf Kalla, Vice President of Indonesia (2004–2009) (2014–2019)”, AJC Facebook page, 27 May 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/AJCGlobal/videos/533587197307889/>.

<sup>48</sup> Safiullah Junejo and Kante Hamed, “UIII Discusses Muslims and Non-Muslims Relationship in History”, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, 8 May 2023, <https://www.uiii.ac.id/news/57345/uiii-discusses-muslims-and-non-muslims-relationship-in-history>.

<sup>49</sup> The authors have engaged with this community of Indonesians, who identify as Jewish either through conversion or because of their ancestral links to Dutch Jews who came to Indonesia.

meaningful interfaith relations with the Muslim majority. The exclusion of Judaism as an officially recognised religion in Indonesia and the need for Jews to identify themselves in their official identification documents as adherents of any of the recognised religions also is a deterrent.<sup>50</sup> The biggest challenge for the government in advancing interfaith dialogue thus will be creating safe spaces where people of different religions feel confident to speak about their beliefs even if their religions are not officially recognised. The Indonesian government must first invest in soft power tactics to promote a culture of openness to interfaith diplomacy.

**“A shift in attitude towards Israel on the part of Saudi Arabia could affect sentiments among some sections of Indonesia’s increasingly conservative Muslim population.”**

In the mix of opportunities for Israel-Indonesia relations is the potential for a shift in policy towards Israel on the part of Saudi Arabia, considered to be the epicentre of Islam, with its king being custodian of the two holy mosques in Islam (i.e., the mosques in Mecca and Medina). It is well known that funds from Saudi Arabia have been received by religious institutions in Indonesia.<sup>51</sup> A shift in attitude towards Israel on the part of Saudi Arabia could affect sentiments among some sections of Indonesia’s increasingly conservative Muslim population. But

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<sup>50</sup> 1. Chris Barrett and Karuni Rompies, “Keeping the Faith, Quietly: Inside Muslim Indonesia’s Hidden Jewish Community”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/keeping-the-faith-quietly-inside-muslim-indonesia-s-hidden-jewish-community-20220203-p59tnv.html>; Ahmad, “Gunakan KTP Kristen, Komunitas Yahudi Indonesia Mengaku Lebih Aman”, *Hidayatullah.com*, 30 April 2017, <https://hidayatullah.com/berita/nasional/2017/04/30/115795/gunakan-ktp-kristen-komunitas-yahudi-indonesia-mengaku-lebih-aman.html>

<sup>51</sup> Gökçe Şencan et al., “Indonesia and the Middle East: Exploring Connections”, Middle East Institute, 19 December 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indonesia-and-middle-east-exploring-connections>.

normalisation of Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel would require a peace initiative that provides a solution for the Israeli-Palestine conflict, a prospect that seems unlikely for some time.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Indonesia does not have the security considerations that served as motivation for the Arab states to seek normalisation with Israel, that is, the concerns they share with Israel about the growing threat from Iran.<sup>53</sup> However, ties with Israel could have significant economic benefits and could boost Indonesia's technology base, given Israel's leadership in this area. Indonesia could also derive benefits in the health sector and in agricultural technology. The UAE has already seen economic payoffs since the signing of the Abraham Accords. In 2021, trade between Israel and the UAE reached about US\$1.154 billion, a hefty amount considering that official ties were established only in September 2020.<sup>54</sup>

However, Indonesia's sociopolitical constraints remain an impediment to establishing official ties. Unlike countries in the Middle East, which are led by strong monarchies that dominate policymaking, Indonesian policymakers need to be wary of the domestic political consequences of broaching friendly ties with Israel as long as the Palestinian conflict continues to fester.

In pursuing interfaith diplomacy, it must be remembered that the Indonesian public tends to regard the country's anti-Israeli stance as an expression of solidarity with Palestine. While the Abraham Accords

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<sup>52</sup> Tovah Lazaroff, "Israel-Saudi Peace Can solve Palestinian conflict, Netanyahu says," *Jerusalem Post*, 15 December 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-725011>

<sup>53</sup> Dennis Ross, "The Abraham Accords and The Changing Shape of the Middle East", The Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 21 June 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/abraham-accords-and-changing-shape-middle-east>

<sup>54</sup> Mohamed Maher, "Two Years On, The Abraham Accords Bear Fruit", Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 October 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-years-abraham-accords-bear-fruit>

offer a sound model for Indonesia, their promises of “strengthening peace in the Middle East” remain to be tested.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, just recently, in May 2023, the conflict in Gaza flared up again, with rockets being fired into Israel by Palestinians and Israelis conducting air strikes on the strip. Therefore, the Indonesian government must ensure that expectations are managed so that pursuit of IRD is not seen among Indonesians as compromising their solidarity with Palestinians. ◆

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<sup>55</sup> US State Department, “The Abraham Accords – Declaration”.



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